

ROUGH TRADE

by Dave Guilford

“Not for nothing, kid, but there's cheaper places to sit.”

Jerry looked up and asked, “How much do I owe you?”

“You're at \$36.80 on the meter. This is the address you wanted, right?”

“Yeah, this is the place,” Jerry said, dropping his gaze again. “You mind if I sit here a little while longer?”

“It's your world, kid, I'm just driving in it. But I almost didn't pick you up, looking the way you do. So I gotta ask. You do have the money for the fare, right?”

“It's inside the house; I'll bring it out to you.” Jerry's voice shook. “Do I look that bad?”

“You look like you caught a pretty savage beating, kid,” the cabbie ventured. “What's with the bandages on your arm?”

Jerry whispered hoarsely, “They burned me.”

“They burned you?” the cabbie repeated in shock. “Who burned you?”

Jerry was on the verge of breaking down. His hands covered his face and his shoulders shook. “I owe this guy some money, and I can't pay. My brother's on a basketball scholarship at Syracuse, and now they want him to shave points. They're going to come after my family if I don't come up with the money.”

“Jesus, kid, what did you get yourself into?”

Jerry did his best to pull it together. He wondered how he was going to tell his father. Maybe telling an anonymous cab driver would give him the courage to face the old man.

“I was going to NYU for finance. I developed a trading algorithm while I was working on my degree. I didn't have any money to test it, so I ran it on a computer simulator. It worked perfectly. One of my professors suggested I package the system and market it to traders. So I wrote a business plan and went to a couple of banks. They all told me the same thing. Great idea, but without real world results they weren't willing to risk it.”

The cabbie lit up a smoke and offered one to Jerry. Jerry trembled visibly, and the cabbie realized they'd probably used cigarettes to burn his arm. He tossed the pack and told Jerry to go on.

“My roommate knew this guy at school who always had a lot of money. He was kinda shady, but he loaned me \$5,000 without a hassle. I made about forty percent on the money in the first couple days, so I paid him back and made a few bucks for myself at the same time. About a week later, he asks me if the system will work with a larger amount of money. Well, theoretically it would work with any amount of money. So he tells me he wants to put in \$20,000 and now there's no interest, we're partners.

We'll split the profits fifty-fifty. This time, we make almost sixty percent before we cash out.”

The cabbie rubbed his eyes, knowing what the kid was about to tell him before it even came out of his mouth.

“He introduced me to this older guy, and the guy tells me he wants me to manage some money for him. He tells me he wants to start with \$150,000. I really don't know what to say at this point. He offers to split the profits with me. I tell him that even hedge fund managers only make twenty percent of the profits they generate. He tells me this is different, he wants me to be a partner.”

“Things went well at first. We made good money. Then Lehman Brothers went under, and I started getting margin calls right and left. He told me not to worry about it, he just kept putting more money in. By the time they voted on the bailout, I had to tell him we'd lost almost \$300,000. He was really calm about it. He told me that he understood, and that he just wanted his money back. I said, 'No, you don't understand. The money's gone. We lost it.' A week later, a couple of his guys show up, drive me to the bank, make me withdraw my college money, and then they did this to me.”

Jerry slumped in his seat. “My mom is really sick and my dad just got laid off. God, I'm so screwed.” He began to sob.

The cabbie glanced at the modest house, shut off the meter, wished Jerry luck, and made a mental note to take the points on Syracuse from now on.